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ABSTRACT

More than 90% of Bronx Community College (BCC) (New York) students require remedial coursework, and more than 90% also qualify for federal and state aid. Almost all of the freshmen at BCC are the first in their families to attend college. Most of the student body are women, many of whom have children, and there is a large population of English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) students. The Coordinated Freshman Program (CFP) at BCC has developed a series of interventions designed to move students through their developmental programs more rapidly. The unifying elements of these interventions include: (1) classes with 20 or fewer students; (2) counseling; (3) tutoring integrated into the classroom; (4) technology; (5) supportive learning environment; (6) qualified and experienced faculty; and (7) involvement of academic departments. The following programs are among those offered by the CFP: (1) University Skills Immersion Program, a free summer program for entering and continuing freshmen; (2) Freshman Initiative Program, which serves approximately 275 incoming freshmen each year whose scores indicate they must register for at least two developmental classes. These students enroll in five-week module programs which focus on one academic skill in an intensive format; and (3) Intersession Workshops, which offer intensive study in English, ESL, reading, and mathematics. Pass rates in CFP are 20-40% higher than in regular college offerings. (NB)

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Maximizing Retention for At-Risk Freshmen: The Bronx Community College Model

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Maximizing Retention for At-Risk Freshmen:
The Bronx Community College Model

Dr. Jason Finkelstein, Bronx Community College

Bronx Community College, City University of New York, is an open admissions institution. More than 90 percent of our students require remedial coursework and most qualify for financial aid. Almost all of our freshmen are first in their families to attend college. We have a student body that is predominately women - many of whom have children - and a large population of ESL students. The majority of students at Bronx Community College work full or part time while sometimes carrying a heavy academic load so they can qualify for financial aid. More than 90% qualify for federal and state aid.

At Bronx Community College we have developed a series of innovative interventions as part of the Coordinated Freshman Program. The purpose here is to outline what has worked for us, and what we have learned designing programs for at-risk students. Elements of the Coordinated Freshman Program will be described. Data on program success is included.

Reflections on What Works

Listen to students

When designing a program, it is essential that the student culture on campus and the lives of students off campus be considered. If programs are designed with little understanding of the lives of students, these programs will not succeed. For example, assuming that a letter to students will be sufficient to promote a program may be mistake. Are student's addresses accurate? How many students read their mail on time? Given a choice, a phone campaign followed by a mailing works for us. Where do students get their information?

Often colleges offer counseling and students do not respond. "My door is open, why don't students come?" is a common refrain. Maybe counseling, as we perceive it may be different for our students. It is important to ask: "How is the helping relationship perceived by our students?"

Designing a program at BCC that asks student to be available in the afternoon is a problem. Courses in the afternoon will be hard to fill. Our female students want to be home when the children arrive after school. In the Bronx, many children are met at the schoolhouse door. Students also may work in the afternoon.

Be proactive in program design

All of our programs utilize a proactive approach. We encourage faculty and peer tutors to identify problems early so we can address them. We know that just because we offer tutoring does not mean students will use the service, so most of the tutors in the Coordinated Freshman Program are integrated into the classroom.

Placing tutors in the classroom allows the students and tutors to get to know each other. Students do not have to go anywhere to ask for help. Students who need academic assistance the most may not be the ones asking for tutoring. Some students decide in the first week that they are going to fail. They have given up. With tutors in the classroom, access is easy. How many tutoring centers at community colleges really know which students come for tutoring and why they come?

Recruit the most effective faculty

Here is a question for community college chairpersons and administrators: "Are your best faculty assigned to teach freshman courses?"

It seems obvious that effective, high-quality teaching by involved faculty is essential for maximizing the success of at-risk freshman.

At BCC we utilize a combination of senior faculty and experienced adjuncts. We have very effective tenured faculty in the freshman program who really enjoys the challenge of teaching freshmen. These faculty bring years of experience to the classroom. They know techniques to help students pass the required exit tests, which are linked to our developmental courses. Above all, students sense that these faculty are dedicated to helping them make it to the next level.

Help students feel that they are recognized and appreciated

Customer service has become an over used buzzword in higher education. It is really a simple idea. We stress to our staff that treating students with respect and consideration is essential to retention. We have required training workshops for our tutors.

Students need to feel that their voices are heard and appreciated in the classroom. Our students are street-smart New Yorkers. They sense very early if the faculty member or staff they are dealing with is genuine and really wants to help.

Provide opportunities for students to help other students

One lesson has been driven home many times over the years. Programs where students help other students are very cost effective and are a powerful way to provide services. Obviously, student tutors, mentors, advisers and supplemental instruction leaders need training and supervision, but everyone benefits in this arrangement. The student helpers gain almost as much as the students who are served.

Assess the impact of programs

Research is essential to inform and strengthen program development. We are conducting longitudinal research to determine how effective our programs are over time. We know the immediate results, now we want to determine the impact over several semesters. Prior research showed very positive results in terms of retention and graduation. It is essential to ask, "What works and why?"

Think outside the box

Finally, given the projected student demographics, it seems self-evident that community colleges must constantly re-examine how the needs of at-risk students are being met. At Bronx Community College we often think outside the box as we re-evaluate what we are doing and look to implement new interventions. Thinking creatively about how we deliver services to students is important for us as we move outside the limiting architecture of higher education.

<u>Coordinated Freshman Program</u>

The City University of New York requires that all entering freshman take assessment examinations in English, reading, and mathematics (students may exempt based on their SAT or

New York State Regent scores). Students are then placed in developmental courses. The assessments are taken again as requirements for exit from developmental coursework.

We have developed a series of interventions, part of the Coordinated Freshman Program, designed to move students through their developmental courses more rapidly. Students often get frustrated if they spend semester after semester in developmental courses. They are also expending financial aid resources on developmental work.

Before describing our program, listed below are the unifying elements of our interventions:

Small Classes: All CFP classes/workshops will have twenty students or less. This ratio of faculty to students allows for increased interaction with students and for a degree of individualized attention.

Counseling: Counseling is an important part of CFP. During the academic year Student Development Counselors teach an orientation course (OCD) and provide personal/developmental counseling for students in the Freshman Initiative Program.

Tutoring integrated into the classroom: The model, which has been found most successful, combines the traditional tutoring center design with the integration of tutors into the classroom.

Technology: Many of the CFP courses/workshops utilize computer labs to supplement classroom instruction.

Supportive learning environment: One of the missions of the CFP at Bronx Community College is to coordinate the various academic, student development, and administrative aspects of the program with the intention of providing a supportive, proactive learning environment to maximize student success.

Highly qualified and experienced faculty: Faculty who teach in the CFP is for the most part experienced full time faculty who participate because they want to teach freshmen. Adjuncts are also selected based on their teaching experience.

Involvement of academic departments: The Chairpersons from the appropriate departments are involved in the planning of the program. The Director has regular contact with the Chairs and the other members of the department. This involvement strengthens the program.

Program Descriptions

University Skills Immersion Program

Entering and continuing freshmen are invited to participate in a free summer program. Free developmental courses are available in English, ESL, mathematics, and reading. Students must meet with an advisor to be placed into a USIP course. Extensive tutoring and computer labs are utilized.

We offer an *Orientation to College Life* for incoming freshman during USIP. Student Development Counselors teach this orientation.

Freshman Initiative Program - Academic Year

This Program serves approximately two hundred seventy-five incoming freshmen each year whose test scores indicate that they must register for at least two developmental courses: Students enroll in a block program that is scheduled on Monday through Thursday mornings from 9 am – 12 noon in a five-week module. In the second five-week module, students move to the next level of the sequence. In the third module students move to the third course in their program. Class size is limited to twenty students with the additional enhancements of peer tutors in the classroom.

Students participate in a FOCUS group where tutors/mentors providing a structured environment for support and problem solving. Presentations ranging from time management, to using the library, to AIDS awareness are part of the FOCUS experience. All elements of the program will work together to maximize success during the period of adjustment to the college experience.

Utilizing modules of five-weeks duration allows students to focus on one academic skill in an intensive format. With small class size and tutorial support, pass rates are significantly higher in FIP than in comparable courses. Students can complete three developmental courses a semester via this intensive approach focusing on one remedial course at a time.

Intersession Workshops - January/June/August

During the intersession periods Bronx Community College offers workshops for students in English, ESL, reading and mathematics. Workshops are intensive, three to five day hours a day, usually for ten days. Students are selected based on faculty recommendations.

Students who are selected are those whose academic work during the previous semester indicated that they were close to passing a developmental course, but they did not pass the exit/final exam.

The schedule and the pedagogical models vary by department and by the needs of the students assigned to the workshops. For example, the English department offers a total immersion "Top-speed" computer-enhanced workshop that permits students to write and edit using word processing. In addition, all the English workshops make use of computer lab work, which has proven to be a very effective teaching and learning tool.

Mathematics workshops focus on particular student difficulties in a concentrated and intensive format geared toward passing the exit exam. Similar approaches are used in reading

and ESL. All workshops make extensive use of *integrated tutoring* as part of the format. Special emphasis is made on preparing students for the required CUNY exit examination that students take at the end of the workshop.

Academic Year Workshops

During the academic year CFP offers 20-hour workshops for students who have repeated difficulty passing the CUNY exit examinations in English and reading. These workshops are specifically targeting skills needed to pass the examination.

Tutor Training

BCC has grants to fund tutor training and expanded tutoring services. All tutors are required to participate ten hours of training. These training focuses on the skills needed to be an effective tutor.

Funding

The CFP is funded from the CUNY Central Administration. Other grants provided supplementary support.

Outcomes

The City University of New York requires that all freshman programs compile data on student progress in the developmental courses. Summarized below are some basic data. Pass rates in CFP are 20-40% higher than in regular college offerings.

Sample Pass Rates USIP 2002

English 01	70%
ESL 01	70%
MTH 01	82%

FIP – Fall 2001

English 01	71%
RDL 01	86%
MTH 01	80%

Intersession Workshops 2001-2002

CUNY MTH Prep	88%
MTH 05	85%
RDL Exam Prep	68%

Retention Data – USIP

Freshman needing 2-3 developmental courses based on CUNY placements

One Year	USIP Students	Others
	84%	60%
Two Years	53%	34%

At Bronx Community College we are constantly reevaluating our programs. Assessment and evaluation is now more required than ever by the City University of New York. Our data indicates that students are completing their developmental courses more rapidly, are graduating at a faster rate, and are finding employment in their chosen fields. Our one-year freshman retention rate compares favorably with community colleges serving an at-risk population. We are intent on improving these numbers.

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